A/AC.172/1994/CRP.11/Add.10
29 August 1994
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: FRENCH

COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
Substantive session
Agenda item 7

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE

Draft report

Rapporteur: Mr. El Hassane ZAHID (Morocco)

Addendum

IV. COMPREHENSIVE STUDY ON CONFERENCE SERVICES

Introduction and overview

1. In section II, paragraph 42, of its resolution 48/228 of 23 December 1993, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its forty-ninth session a comprehensive study on the organization, management and human resources requirements for the provision of adequate conference services as a basis for the consideration of his proposals for the regular budget for the biennium 1996-1997, and to provide Member States with previous studies on the matter that were carried out during the biennium 1992-1993.

2. At its 369th to 373rd meetings, from 24 to 26 August 1994, the Committee on Conferences reviewed an interim report on the comprehensive study on the matter (A/AC.172/1994/CRP.6).

Discussion

3. The view was expressed that the study contained in document A/AC.172/1994/CRP.6 was well structured and provided the main areas for inclusion in the final report to be submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session. It would be useful if the information were supplemented by graphs.

4. The view was also expressed that the study as presented contained terminology that was not in keeping with other United Nations documents and lacked sufficient concrete conclusions and recommendations.

5. Clarification was sought and received from the Secretariat regarding various aspects of the study. In reply to queries regarding the trade-offs that might be necessary when seeking an optimal balance among quality, timeliness and efficiency, the Secretariat noted that, while compromises were not a deliberate policy of Conference Services, they were a daily necessity.

6. In reply to a query concerning proposals for improvement, the representative of the Secretariat noted that the account manager function would not entail staffing implications. Rather than duplicating the work of the committee secretaries, account managers would complement their work, relying on committee secretaries for an assessment of the requirements of Member States and the schedule of provision of documents by author departments. In turn, account managers would provide information to committee secretaries concerning all aspects of conference-servicing for their bodies. That concept was related to a perceived need to strengthen the advance planning function of Conference Services, particularly in the documentation area. The account manager would track the development of a document from the initial request, and work with committee secretaries to resolve problems that might arise at any stage of document production.

7. In reply to a query concerning the performance improvement function, the representative of the Secretariat noted that the Secretariat was proposing to give a formal structure to the concern about performance improvement by establishing it as a distinct function, that is, by developing networks of staff members throughout Conference Services who would meet regularly to coordinate improvement projects in their units and report to the Director of Conference Services.

8. In reply to a query concerning performance measurements, the representative of the Secretariat stated that until now, performance measurements had been purely quantitative. Conference Services would like to develop performance indicators for internal and external reporting that would cover the criteria of timeliness, quality and efficiency referred to in paragraph 6 of the interim report.

9. In reply to a query concerning cost accounting, the representative of the Secretariat stated that the effective management of conference services resources required an active knowledge of their costs. Consequently, Conference Services had proposed a detailed cost-accounting study so as not to rely on hypothetical costs for planning and managing of resources. Such a system would enable Conference Services: to manage resources more effectively; to decide whether it was more cost-effective to use temporary staff or contractual services; and to respond more quickly to delegations' queries concerning financial implications and actual costs of conference services.

10. With regard to the technological innovations programme in Conference Services, it was stated that the optical disk system on which United Nations documents were currently being stored should be expanded at an early date to provide access to all interested missions in New York and Geneva. The Committee was informed that the capacity of the optical disk system was being expanded under provisions contained in the programme budget for 1994-1995, and that missions wishing to have access to it would be assisted by the Secretariat.

11. In reply to a query concerning dynamic staffing practices that would allow staff to be redeployed where needed, the representative of the Secretariat indicated that in the past some consideration had been given to the possibility of making language staff more interchangeable, which would be studied again in the light of current recruitment and placement rules and practices.

12. In reply to a query concerning demand forecasting, the representative of the Secretariat explained that up to now meetings and documentation workload estimates had been based on output statistics, which reflected capacity rather than demand at a given time. In order to manage conference services resources more effectively, estimates of real demand were necessary.

13. The delegation of Egypt made a detailed proposal regarding the improvement of the Arabic translation services (see annex II).

Conclusions and recommendations

14. The Committee noted with regret that no final report had been submitted and expected that the final report would be produced in time for due consideration by the Committee before submission to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session.

15. The Committee was of the view that the final report on the comprehensive study on conference services should:

(a) Incorporate terminology and definitions compatible with other United Nations documents;

(b) Have a structure that followed the request in the mandating resolution and clarify the data contained therein with graphic presentations;

(c) Recommend performance indicators that would include measurements of quality, timeliness, accountability and cost-effectiveness of conference services and develop a cost accounting system that would provide better information on the real costs of conference-servicing. In that regard, the Committee wished to recall that it had already recommended that some of those measures should be taken and that those recommendations had been approved by the General Assembly in previous resolutions. It expressed its deep concern that the Secretariat had not met that request;

(d) Contain specific proposals to address documentation problems in order to achieve significant improvement in terms of quality, timeliness of submission and cost-effectiveness;

(e) Contain a detailed analysis of staff and other resource requirements for the provision of adequate conference services, including their training, especially for translators;

(f) Consider dynamic staffing practices, such as cross-training and hiring of personnel with broader skills, that would facilitate redeployment;

(g) Propose improved indicators to estimate real demand for conference services.

16. The Committee was not convinced of the need to hire external consultants for the further stages of the study, as the Secretariat had sufficient in-house expertise to deal with the matter. The Committee also wished to emphasize that the use of adequate internal expertise would be more cost-effective. Therefore, the Committee recommended that further stages of the study should be carried out through the use of internal expertise.

17. The Committee stressed the equal importance of quality, timeliness and cost-effectiveness and appreciated that the Secretariat recognized that an optimum should be achieved in all three areas.

18. The Committee trusted that the Secretariat, in consultation with interested delegations, would follow up on the proposal made by the delegation of Egypt regarding the improvement of the Arabic translation services.